

U Thant on Regionalism

Secretary-General U Thant of the United Nations chose an unfortunate moment to downgrade regional efforts to keep the peace. It is understandable that the Secretary-General should be concerned about the United States' unilateral intervention in the Dominican Republic, but this was not the point of his recent complaint. Although he did not question the right of any regional organization to act under the terms of its own constitution, he expressed fear that if the Organization of American States enforces peace in the Dominican Republic the Organization of African Unity or the League of Arab States could do the same in their respective areas.

The right of nations to seek the settlement of disputes through regional agencies is clearly set forth in the United Nations Charter. Indeed, the Charter says that when a dispute endangers the peace, U.N. members shall, first of all, seek a solution by negotiation, enquiry, mediation, conciliation, arbitration, judicial settlement, resort to regional agencies or arrangements, or other peaceful means of their own choice." The objective was clearly to bring about the settlement of local threats to the peace by local means before invoking the procedures of the United Nations.

This is sound practice in any circumstances. At present the reliance upon such regional peace-keeping agencies as may be able to function is especially important because of the bankruptcy and paralysis of the United Nations itself. The hope of obtaining any prompt and constructive action from the U.N. in the Dominican Republic crisis would have been remote. Moreover, the U.N. would be less qualified to handle this kind of delicate situation than the OAS. At least the OAS should be allowed a free hand until it has had a chance to resolve the problem in a manner satisfactory to the U.N.

If the U.N. allows the OAS to settle the Dominican problem, it does not follow that it would have to stand aside and let every other regional organization work its will upon a small state. Some regional agencies adhere to U.N. principles; others do not. Some can be trusted to deal fairly with all their members; others may be tainted by predatory interests. A wise and alert U.N. would stand in readiness to intervene when there are abuses of power on the part of a regional organization. But it would be most unfortunate if it got into a posture of hostility toward all regional peace-keeping operations because in some instances the powers of regional agencies may be abused.